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MOROCCAN PLANS TO INVADE SPANISH SAHARA

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

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CIA/DCI/IAM 751003

3 October 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Honorable Henry A. Kissinger  
Assistant to the President (National  
Security Affairs)

SUBJECT : Moroccan Plans to Invade Spanish Sahara

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2. With the Spanish military still in the Sahara, a serious conflict could develop. If Morocco loses this gamble, it could ultimately lead to the downfall of the present government in Rabat. On the other side, prolonged fighting and heavy Spanish casualties could provoke a political crisis in Madrid. There is also potential for drawing Algeria into the conflict. Mauritania, which also has claims to Spanish Sahara, is likely to avoid any military involvement.

3. The attached Intelligence Alert Memorandum examines this situation and its implications in greater depth. It has been discussed at the working level with CIA, DIA, State/INR and NSA. The collection and analytical elements of the Intelligence Community have been alerted and will report further developments through normal channels or in further Alert Memoranda, as appropriate.

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W. E. Colby  
Director

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3 October 1975

INTELLIGENCE ALERT MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Moroccan Invasion of Spanish Sahara

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2. King Hassan has pursued a high-risk policy on Spanish Sahara for some time. Last August, he reiterated his intention to acquire Spanish Sahara before the end of the year, with force if necessary. Although he promised then to await an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on Moroccan-Mauritanian claims to the territory, he may now have decided to act in a moment of what he perceives as Spanish weakness. There is also increasing anxiety in Rabat that the Court's decision may be ambiguous or unfavorable to Morocco and that the report of a fact-finding mission of the UN Committee on Decolonization will favor independence for the territory. Finally, it is possible that Hassan has concluded that armed intervention will provoke favorable international mediation. To date most Moroccans have supported Hassan's position on Spanish Sahara, but if a military gamble fails he could be in serious trouble and vulnerable to a coup.

3. Rabat expects effective resistance only from some 5,000 Spanish legionnaires in the Sahara and Spanish air force units stationed in the Canary Islands and possibly from Algerian ground forces. The Moroccans are skeptical that Algeria will intervene militarily, but Morocco reportedly is arranging for a token presence in Rabat of troops from Syria, Egypt, the PLO, and possibly Saudi Arabia as a psychological deterrent to an Algerian military reaction. We have no evidence, however, that other Arab troops are arriving in Morocco, although small contingents

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could arrive quickly by air without being detected. We doubt that most eastern Arabs would involve themselves in a potential inter-Arab conflict except in a mediating role, although the PLO may be an exception.

4. Morocco has kept approximately one fourth of its more than 55,000-man army in southern Morocco since mid-1974, despite considerable supply problems, and low troop morale because of the primitive conditions. We estimate that most of the 12,000 to 15,000 Moroccan troops in the southern zone have been tactical infantry, with some armor, artillery, and air defense units. Although the army has established a command-and-support structure in the south, the Moroccans would nonetheless face considerable obstacles in launching and sustaining a major offensive against either Spanish or Algerian forces.

5. Madrid could muster sufficient strength from its own forces to defeat a Moroccan invasion. The Spanish have some 16,000 army and air force personnel in the Sahara, with an additional 20,000 located nearby in the Canary Islands. The Spanish have 51 medium tanks and 35 armored cars that could provide immediate armored support. Spanish forces are well-equipped and trained, compared to the Moroccan army. In terms of air power, Madrid has more than 60 sub-sonic fighter-bombers immediately available; two squadrons of F-5 tactical fighter-bombers and a total of four squadrons of air defense command Mirage III and F-4C interceptors are in reserve in Spain.

6. If he has decided in favor of war, we believe King Hassan has seriously misjudged the likely Spanish response to an invasion. Although Madrid does not want to remain in Spanish Sahara or fight a colonial war, Spanish troops in the Sahara would resist a forcible eviction. At the same time Madrid would call on the UN to restore peace and ask Washington for its support. The US response to this request would strongly influence Spain's attitude toward accommodating the US position in the current base negotiations. The Spanish government would expect that longstanding US-Spanish defense cooperation should justify at least US diplomatic support, particularly if the Moroccans, contrary to early assurances, employed US-made weapons in any attack. The Moroccans, on the other hand, will also look to us for at least diplomatic support and react strongly to anything we do that might be interpreted as favoring Spain. A position of strict neutralism is probably about the most that King Hassan will tolerate without serious strain in our bilateral relations.

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7. Initially, an armed conflict with Morocco would unite most Spaniards and help the regime divert the public's attention away from internal problems. If the fighting dragged on, however, the war could become another issue that would divide Spaniards. Divisiveness would also appear in the military -- heretofore the most stable element in Spanish society -- who eventually would disagree over the merits of fighting a war for a territory the government has already announced it is prepared to give up.

8. Algeria, which favors independence for Spanish Sahara, will probably stop short of direct military intervention. It would, however, create as many problems for Morocco as possible. We would expect Algiers to support the POLISARIO Front, a pro-independence Saharan group, in waging a sustained insurgency effort. Algiers might also move troops to Morocco's northern border to exert pressure on King Hassan and renew its support of Moroccan dissidents. The Algerians would almost certainly mount an intensive international diplomatic effort to denounce Moroccan aggression.

9. In the less likely event that Algiers did intervene with direct military force, the Moroccans might achieve some initial success because they outnumber the 4,000 to 6,000 troops estimated to be in southwestern Algeria. The Algerian air force of some 200 combat aircraft could, however, turn the tide against Morocco's 40 combat aircraft, and play a decisive role in support of Algeria's ground forces, which are about the same size as Morocco's, but better trained and equipped.

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